

# Prehistory

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Human **prehistory** is the period between the use of the first stone tools by hominins c. 3.3 million years ago and the invention of writing systems. The use of symbols, marks, and images appears very early among humans, but the earliest known writing systems appeared c. 5,300 years ago and it took thousands of years for writing systems to be widely adopted. In some human cultures, writing systems were not used until the nineteenth century and, in a few, not even until the present. The end of prehistory therefore came at very different dates in different places, and the term is less often used in discussing societies where prehistory ended relatively recently.

Sumer in Mesopotamia, the Indus valley civilization, and ancient Egypt were the first civilizations to develop their own scripts and to keep historical records; this took place already during the early Bronze Age. Neighboring civilizations were the first to follow. Most other civilizations reached the end of prehistory during the Iron Age. The three-age system of division of prehistory into the Stone Age, followed by the Bronze Age and Iron Age, remains in use for much of Eurasia and North Africa, but is not generally used in those parts of the world where the working of hard metals arrived abruptly from contact with Eurasian cultures, such as Oceania, Australasia, much of Sub-Saharan Africa, and parts of the Americas. With some exceptions in Pre-Columbian civilizations in the Americas, these areas did not develop complex writing systems before the arrival of Eurasians, so their prehistory reaches into relatively recent periods; for example, 1788 is usually taken as the end of the prehistory of Australia.

The period when a culture is written about by others, but has not developed its own writing system is often known as the protohistory of the culture. By definition,<sup>[1]</sup> there are no written records from human prehistory, so dating of prehistoric materials is crucial. Clear techniques for dating were not well-developed until the nineteenth century.<sup>[2]</sup>

This article is concerned with human prehistory, the time since behaviorally and anatomically modern humans first appeared until the beginning of recorded history. Earlier periods are also called "prehistoric"; there are separate articles for the overall history of the Earth and the history of life before humans.

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## Definition

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### Beginning

The term "prehistory" can refer to the vast span of time since the beginning of the Universe or the Earth, but more often it refers to the period since life appeared on Earth, or even more specifically to the time since human-like beings appeared.<sup>[3][4]</sup>

### End

The date marking the end of prehistory is typically defined as the advent of the contemporary written historical record.<sup>[5][6]</sup> The date consequently varies widely from region to region depending on the date when relevant records become a useful academic resource.<sup>[7]</sup> For example, in Egypt it is generally accepted that prehistory ended around 3200 BCE, whereas in New Guinea the end of the prehistoric era is set much more recently, at around 1900 common era. In Europe the relatively well-documented classical cultures of Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome had neighbouring cultures, including the Celts and to a lesser extent the Etruscans, with little or no writing, and historians must decide how much weight to give to the often highly prejudiced accounts of these "prehistoric" cultures in Greek and Roman literature.

### Time periods

In dividing up human prehistory in Eurasia, historians typically use the three-age system, whereas scholars of pre-human time periods typically use the well-defined geologic record and its internationally defined stratum base within the geologic time scale. The three-age system is the periodization of human prehistory into three consecutive time periods, named for their respective predominant tool-making technologies:

- Stone Age
- Bronze Age
- Iron Age<sup>[8]</sup>



Massive stone pillars at Göbekli Tepe, in southeast Turkey, erected for ritual use by early Neolithic people 11,000 years ago



An early sketch imagining an adult and a juvenile from prehistoric times making a stone tool

## History of the term

The notion of "prehistory" began to surface during the Enlightenment in the work of antiquarians who used the word 'primitive' to describe societies that existed before written records.<sup>[9]</sup> The first use of the word prehistory in English, however, occurred in the *Foreign Quarterly Review* in 1836.<sup>[10]</sup>

The use of the geologic time scale for pre-human time periods, and of the three-age system for human prehistory, is a system that emerged during the late nineteenth century in the work of British, German, and Scandinavian anthropologists, archeologists, and antiquarians.<sup>[8]</sup>



A nineteenth century concept of early humans in a wilderness

## Means of research

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The main source of information for prehistory is archaeology (a branch of anthropology), but some scholars are beginning to make more use of evidence from the natural and social sciences.<sup>[11][12][13]</sup> This view has been articulated by advocates of deep history.

The primary researchers into human prehistory are archaeologists and physical anthropologists who use excavation, geologic and geographic surveys, and other scientific analysis to reveal and interpret the nature and behavior of pre-literate and non-literate peoples.<sup>[3]</sup> Human population geneticists and historical linguists are also providing valuable insight for these questions.<sup>[4]</sup> Cultural anthropologists help provide context for societal interactions, by which objects of human origin pass among people, allowing an analysis of any article that arises in a human prehistoric context.<sup>[4]</sup> Therefore, data about prehistory is provided by a wide variety of natural and social sciences, such as anthropology, archaeology, archaeoastronomy, comparative linguistics, biology, geology, molecular genetics, paleontology, palynology, physical anthropology, and many others.

Human prehistory differs from history not only in terms of its chronology, but in the way it deals with the activities of archaeological cultures rather than named nations or individuals. Restricted to material processes, remains, and artifacts rather than written records, prehistory is anonymous. Because of this, reference terms that prehistorians use, such as "Neanderthal" or "Iron Age", are modern labels with definitions sometimes subject to debate.

## Stone Age

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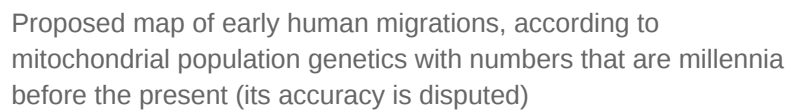
The concept of a "Stone Age" is found useful in the archaeology of most of the world, although in the archaeology of the Americas it is called by different names and begins with a Lithic stage, or sometimes Paleo-Indian. The sub-divisions described below are used for Eurasia, and not consistently across the whole area.

### Palaeolithic

"Palaeolithic" means "Old Stone Age", and begins with the first use of stone tools. The Paleolithic is the earliest period of the Stone Age.

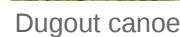
The early part of the Palaeolithic is called the Lower Palaeolithic, which predates *Homo sapiens*, beginning with *Homo habilis* (and related species) and the earliest stone tools, dated to around 2.5 million years ago.<sup>[14]</sup> Evidence of control of fire by early humans during the Lower Palaeolithic Era is uncertain and has at best limited scholarly support. The most widely accepted claim is that *H. erectus* or *H. ergaster* made fires

Early Homo sapiens originated some 200,000 years ago, ushering in the Middle Palaeolithic. Anatomic changes indicating modern language capacity also arise during the Middle Palaeolithic.<sup>[15]</sup> During the Middle Palaeolithic Era, there is the first definitive evidence of human use of fire. Sites in Zambia have charred bone and wood that have been dated to 61,000 BP. The systematic burial of the dead, music, early art, and the use of increasingly sophisticated multi-part tools are highlights of the Middle Paleolithic.



## Mesolithic

The Mesolithic period began at the end of the Pleistocene epoch, some 10,000 BP, and ended with the introduction of agriculture, the date of which varied by geographic region. In some areas, such as the Near East, agriculture was already underway by the end of the Pleistocene, and there the Mesolithic is short and poorly defined. In areas with limited glacial impact, the term "Epipalaeolithic" is sometimes preferred.



Regions that experienced greater environmental effects as the last ice age ended have a much more evident Mesolithic era, lasting millennia. In Northern Europe, societies were able to live well on rich food supplies from the marshlands fostered by the warmer climate. Such conditions produced distinctive human behaviours that are preserved in the material record, such as the Maglemosian and Azilian cultures. These conditions also delayed the coming of the Neolithic until as late as 4000 BCE (6,000 BP) in northern Europe.



Remains from this period are few and far between, often limited to middens. In forested areas, the first signs of deforestation have been found, although this would only begin in earnest during the Neolithic, when more space was needed for agriculture.

The Mesolithic is characterized in most areas by small composite flint tools: microliths and microburins. Fishing tackle, stone adzes, and wooden objects, e.g. canoes and bows, have been found at some sites. These technologies first occur in Africa, associated with the Azilian cultures, before spreading to Europe through the Ibero-Maurusian culture of Northern Africa and the Kebaran culture of the Levant. However, independent discovery is not ruled out.

## Neolithic

"Neolithic" means "New Stone Age". Although there were several species of human beings during the Paleolithic, by the Neolithic only Homo sapiens sapiens remained.<sup>[20]</sup> (Homo floresiensis may have survived right up to the very dawn of the Neolithic, about 12,200 years ago.)<sup>[21]</sup> This was a period of primitive technological and social development. It began about 10,200 BCE in some parts of the Middle East, and later in other parts of the world<sup>[22]</sup> and ended between 4,500 and 2,000 BCE. The Neolithic is a progression of behavioral and cultural characteristics and changes, including the use of wild and domestic crops and of domesticated animals.

Early Neolithic farming was limited to a narrow range of plants, both wild and domesticated, which included einkorn wheat, millet and spelt, and the keeping of dogs, sheep, and goats. By about 6,900–6,400 BCE, it included domesticated cattle and pigs, the establishment of permanently or seasonally inhabited settlements, and the use of pottery. The Neolithic period saw the development of early villages, agriculture, animal domestication, tools, and the onset of the earliest recorded incidents of warfare.<sup>[23]</sup> The Neolithic era commenced with the beginning of farming, which produced the "Neolithic Revolution". It ended when metal tools became widespread (in the Copper Age or Bronze Age; or, in some geographical regions, in the Iron Age). The term *Neolithic* is commonly used in the Old World, as its application to cultures in the Americas and Oceania that did not fully develop metal-working technology raises problems.



Entrance to the Ġgantija phase temple complex of Haġar Qim, Malta, 3900 BCE <sup>[19]</sup>



An array of Neolithic artifacts, including bracelets, axe heads, chisels, and polishing tools - Neolithic stone artifacts are by definition polished and, except for specialty items, not chipped



The monumental building at Luni sul Mignone in Blera, Italy, 3500 BCE

Settlements became more permanent with some having circular houses with single rooms made of mudbrick. Settlements might have a surrounding stone wall to keep domesticated animals in and protect the inhabitants from other tribes. Later settlements have rectangular mud-brick houses where the family lived together in single or multiple rooms. Burial findings suggest an ancestor cult where people preserved skulls of the dead. The Vinča culture may have created the earliest system of writing.<sup>[24]</sup> The megalithic temple complexes of Ġgantija are notable for their gigantic structures. Although some late Eurasian Neolithic societies formed complex stratified chiefdoms or even states, states evolved in Eurasia only with the rise of metallurgy, and most Neolithic societies on the whole were relatively simple and egalitarian.<sup>[25]</sup> Most clothing appears to have been made of animal skins, as indicated

by finds of large numbers of bone and antler pins which are ideal for fastening leather. Wool cloth and linen might have become available during the later Neolithic,<sup>[26][27]</sup> as suggested by finds of perforated stones that (depending on size) may have served as spindle whorls or loom weights.<sup>[28][29][30]</sup>

## Chalcolithic

In Old World archaeology, the "Chalcolithic", "Eneolithic", or "Copper Age" refers to a transitional period where early copper metallurgy appeared alongside the widespread use of stone tools. During this period, some weapons and tools were made of copper. This period was still largely Neolithic in character. It is a phase of the Bronze Age before it was discovered that adding tin to copper formed the harder bronze. The Copper Age was originally defined as a transition between the Neolithic and the Bronze Age. However, because it is characterized by the use of metals, the Copper Age is considered a part of the Bronze Age rather than the Stone Age.



Artist's impression of a Copper Age walled city, Los Millares, Iberia



Chalcolithic copper mine in Timna Valley, Negev Desert, Israel

An archaeological site in Serbia contains the oldest securely dated evidence of copper making at high temperature, from 7,500 years ago. The find in June 2010 extends the known record of copper smelting by about 800 years, and suggests that copper smelting may have been invented independently in separate parts of Asia and Europe at that time, rather than spreading from a single source.<sup>[31]</sup> The emergence of metallurgy may have occurred first in the Fertile Crescent, where it gave rise to the Bronze Age in the 4th millennium BCE (the traditional view), although finds from the Vinča culture in Europe have now been securely dated to slightly earlier than those of the Fertile Crescent. Timna Valley contains evidence of copper mining 9,000 to 7,000 years ago. The process of transition from Neolithic to Chalcolithic in the Middle East is characterized in archaeological stone tool assemblages by a decline in high quality raw

material procurement and use. North Africa and the Nile Valley imported its iron technology from the Near East and followed the Near Eastern course of Bronze Age and Iron Age development. However the Iron Age and Bronze Age occurred simultaneously in much of Africa.

## Transition into ancient history

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### Bronze Age

The Bronze Age is the earliest period in which some civilizations have reached the end of prehistory, by introducing written records. The Bronze Age or parts thereof are thus considered to be part of prehistory only for the regions and civilizations who adopted or developed a system of keeping written records during later periods. The invention of writing coincides in some areas with the early beginnings of the Bronze Age. Soon after the appearance of writing, people started creating texts including written accounts of events and records of administrative matters.

The term Bronze Age refers to a period in human cultural development when the most advanced metalworking (at least in systematic and widespread use) included techniques for smelting copper and tin from naturally occurring outcroppings of ores, and then combining them to cast bronze. These naturally occurring ores typically included arsenic as a common impurity. Copper and tin ores are rare, as reflected in

the fact that there were no tin bronzes in Western Asia before 3000 BCE. The Bronze Age forms part of the three-age system for prehistoric societies. In this system, it follows the Neolithic in some areas of the world.

While copper is a common ore, deposits of tin are rare in the Old World, and often had to be traded or carried considerable distances from the few mines, stimulating the creation of extensive trading routes. In many areas as far apart as China and England, the valuable new material was used for weapons but for a long time apparently not available for agricultural tools. Much of it seems to have been hoarded by social elites, and sometimes deposited in extravagant quantities, from Chinese ritual bronzes and Indian copper hoards to European hoards of unused axe-heads.



An image of an ox-drawn plow is accompanied by script, Egypt, c. 1200 BCE

By the end of the Bronze Age large states, which are often called empires, had arisen in Egypt, China, Anatolia (the Hittites), and Mesopotamia, all of them literate.

## Iron Age

The Iron Age is not part of prehistory for all civilizations who had introduced written records during the Bronze Age. Most remaining civilizations did so during the Iron Age, often through conquest by the empires, which continued to expand during this period. For example, in most of Europe conquest by the Roman Empire means that the term Iron Age is replaced by "Roman", "Gallo-Roman", and similar terms after the conquest.

In archaeology, the Iron Age refers to the advent of ferrous metallurgy. The adoption of iron coincided with other changes in some past cultures, often including more sophisticated agricultural practices, religious beliefs and artistic styles, which makes the archaeological Iron Age coincide with the "Axial Age" in the history of philosophy. Although iron ore is common, the metalworking techniques necessary to use iron are very different from those needed for the metal used earlier, and iron was slow-spreading and for long mainly used for weapons, while bronze remained typical for tools, as well as art.

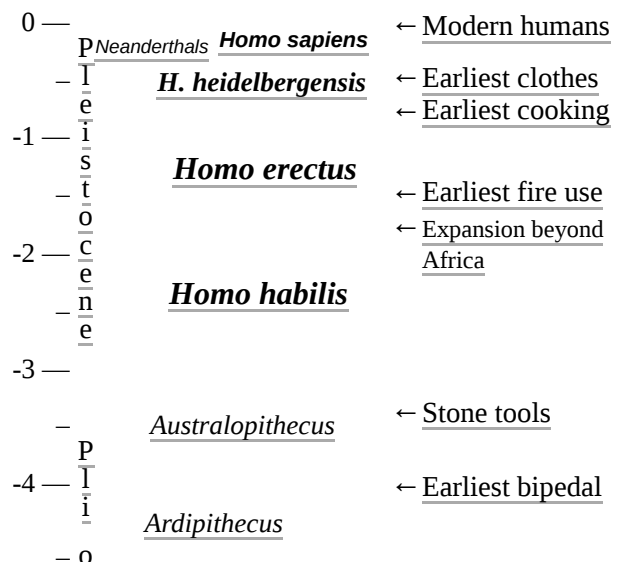
## Timeline

All dates are approximate and conjectural, obtained through research in the fields of anthropology, archaeology, genetics, geology, or linguistics. They are all subject to revision due to new discoveries or improved calculations. BP stands for "Before Present (1950)." BCE stands for Before Common Era".

### Lower Paleolithic

- c. 2.8 million BP – Genus Homo appears
- c. 2.5 million BP – Evidence of early human tools
- c. 600,000 BP – Hunting-gathering

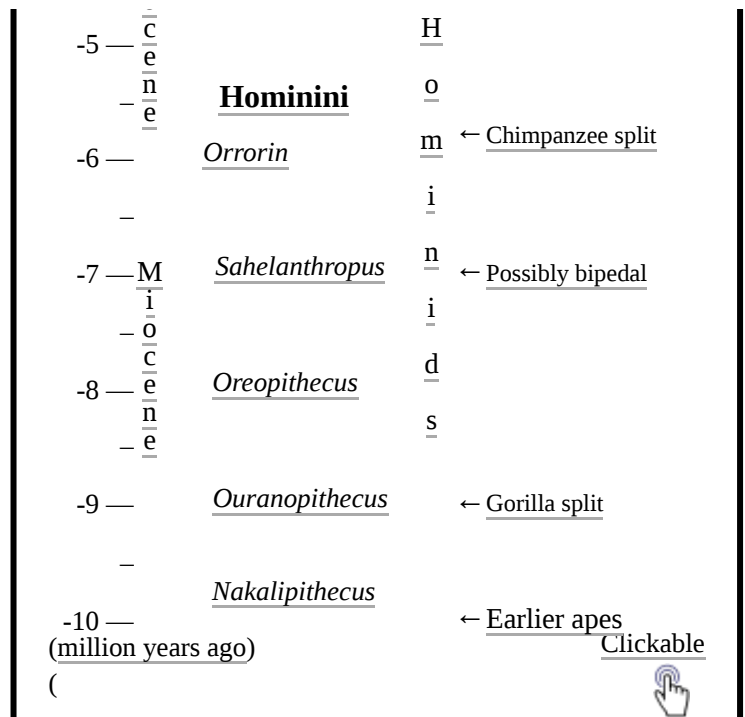
### Hominin timeline



- c. 400,000 BP – Control of fire by early humans

### Middle Paleolithic

- c. 300,000–30,000 BP – Mousterian (Neanderthal) culture in Europe.<sup>[32]</sup>
- c. 200,000 BP – Anatomically modern humans (*Homo sapiens sapiens*) appear in Africa, one of whose characteristics is a lack of significant body hair compared to other primates. See e.g. Omo remains.
- c. 170,000–83,000 BP – Invention of clothing.<sup>[33]</sup>
- c. 75,000 BP – Toba Volcano supereruption.<sup>[34]</sup>
- c. 80,000–50,000 BP – *Homo sapiens* exit Africa as a single population.<sup>[35][36]</sup> In the next millennia, descendants from this population migrate to southern India, the Malay islands, Australia, Japan, China, Siberia, Alaska, and the northwestern coast of North America.<sup>[36]</sup>
- c. 80,000–50,000? BP – Behavioral modernity, by this point including language and sophisticated cognition



### Upper Paleolithic

- c. 45,000 BP / 43,000 BCE – Beginnings of Châtelperronian culture in France.
- c. 40,000 BP / 38,000 BCE – First human settlement in the southern half of the Australian mainland, by indigenous Australians (including the future sites of Sydney,<sup>[37][38]</sup> Perth,<sup>[39]</sup> and Melbourne.<sup>[40]</sup>)
- c. 32,000 BP / 30,000 BCE – Beginnings of Aurignacian culture, exemplified by the cave paintings ("parietal art") of Chauvet Cave in France.
- c. 30,500 BP / 28,500 BCE – New Guinea is populated by colonists from Asia or Australia.<sup>[41]</sup>
- c. 30,000 BP / 28,000 BCE – A herd of reindeer is slaughtered and butchered by humans in the Vezere Valley in what is today France.<sup>[42]</sup>
- c. 28,000–20,000 BP – Gravettian period in Europe. Harpoons, needles, and saws invented.
- c. 26,500 BP – Last Glacial Maximum (LGM). Subsequently, the ice melts and the glaciers retreat again (Late Glacial Maximum). During this latter period human beings return to Western Europe (see Magdalenian culture) and enter North America from Eastern Siberia for the first time (see Paleo-Indians, pre-Clovis culture and Settlement of the Americas).
- c. 26,000 BP / 24,000 BCE – People around the world use fibers to make baby-carriers, clothes, bags, baskets, and nets.<sup>[43]</sup>
- c. 25,000 BP / 23,000 BCE – A settlement consisting of huts built of rocks and mammoth bones is founded near what is now Dolní Věstonice in Moravia in the Czech Republic. This is the oldest human permanent settlement that has been found by archaeologists.<sup>[44]</sup>
- c. 23,000 BP / 21,000 BCE – Small-scale trial cultivation of plants in Ohalo II, a hunter-gatherers' sedentary camp on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, Israel.<sup>[45]</sup>
- c. 16,000 BP / 14,000 BCE – Wisent sculpted in clay deep inside the cave now known as Le Tuc d'Audoubert in the French Pyrenees near what is now the border of Spain.<sup>[46]</sup>



- c. 14,800 BP / 12,800 BCE – The Humid Period begins in North Africa. The region that would later become the Sahara is wet and fertile, and the Aquifers are full.<sup>[47]</sup>

## Mesolithic/Epipaleolithic

- c. 12,500 to 9,500 BCE – Natufian culture: a culture of sedentary hunter-gatherers who may have cultivated Rye in the Levant (Eastern Mediterranean)

## Neolithic

- c. 9,400–9,200 BCE – Figs of a parthenocarpic (and therefore sterile) type are cultivated in the early Neolithic village Gilgal I (in the Jordan Valley, 13 km north of Jericho). The find predates the domestication of wheat, barley, and legumes, and may thus be the first known instance of agriculture.<sup>[48]</sup>
- c. 9,000 BCE – Circles of T-shaped stone pillars erected at Göbekli Tepe in the Southeastern Anatolia Region of Turkey during pre-pottery Neolithic A (PPNA) period. As yet unexcavated structures at the site are thought to date back to the epipaleolithic.
- c. 8,000 BC / 7000 BCE – In northern Mesopotamia, now northern Iraq, cultivation of barley and wheat begins. At first they are used for beer, gruel, and soup, eventually for bread.<sup>[49]</sup> In early agriculture at this time the planting stick is used, but it is replaced by a primitive plow in subsequent centuries.<sup>[50]</sup> Around this time, a round stone tower, now preserved at about 8.5 meters high and 8.5 meters in diameter is built in Jericho.<sup>[51]</sup>

## Chalcolithic

- c. 3,700 BCE – Cuneiform writing appears in Sumer, and records begin to be kept. According to the majority of specialists, the first Mesopotamian writing was a tool that had little connection to the spoken language.<sup>[52]</sup>
- c. 3,300 BCE – Approximate date of death of "Ötzi the Iceman", found preserved in ice in the Ötztal Alps in 1991. A copper-bladed axe, which is a characteristic technology of this era, was found with the corpse.
- c. 3,000 BCE – Stonehenge construction begins. In its first version, it consisted of a circular ditch and bank, with 56 wooden posts.<sup>[53]</sup>

## By region

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### Old World

- Prehistoric Africa
  - Predynastic Egypt
  - Prehistoric Central North Africa
- Prehistoric Asia
  - East Asia:
    - Prehistoric China
    - Prehistoric Korea
    - Japanese Paleolithic
    - East Asian Bronze Age
    - Chinese Bronze Age
  - South Asia

- Prehistory of India
  - South Asian Stone Age
  - Prehistory of Sri Lanka
- Prehistory of Central Asia
- Prehistoric Siberia
- Southeast Asia:
  - Prehistoric Indonesia
  - Prehistoric Thailand
- Southwest Asia (Near East)
  - Prehistory of Iran
  - Aurignacian
  - Natufian culture
  - Ubaid period
  - Uruk period
  - Ancient Near East
- Prehistoric Europe
  - Prehistoric Caucasus
    - Prehistoric Georgia
    - Prehistoric Armenia
  - Paleolithic Europe
  - Neolithic Europe
  - Bronze Age Europe
  - Iron Age Europe
  - Atlantic fringe
    - Prehistoric Britain
    - Prehistoric Ireland
    - Prehistoric Iberia
  - Prehistoric Balkans

## **New World**

- Pre-Columbian Americas
  - Prehistoric Southwestern cultural divisions
  - 2nd millennium BCE in North American history
  - 1st millennium BCE in North American history
  - 1st millennium in North American history
  - Prehistory of Newfoundland and Labrador
  - Prehistory of the Canadian Maritimes
  - Prehistory of Quebec
- Oceania
  - Prehistoric Australia

## See also

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- [Three-age system](#)
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## External links

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- Submerged Landscapes Archaeological Network (<https://web.archive.org/web/20070508182338/http://www.science.ulster.ac.uk/cma/slan/>)
  - The Neanderthal site at Veldwezelt-Hezerwater (<https://www.webcitation.org/query?url=http://www.geocities.com/patrickbringmans/veldwezelt-hezerwater.html&date=2009-10-26+00:15:13>), Belgium.
  - *North Pacific Prehistory* (<https://web.archive.org/web/20200117141201/http://www.northpacificprehistory.com/>) is an academic journal specialising in Northeast Asian and North American archaeology.
  - Prehistory in Algeria and in Morocco (<http://www.neolithique.eu/index.html>)
  - Early Humans ([https://web.archive.org/web/20071106014600/http://sd71.bc.ca/sd71/school/courtmid/Library/subject\\_resources/socials/early\\_humans.htm](https://web.archive.org/web/20071106014600/http://sd71.bc.ca/sd71/school/courtmid/Library/subject_resources/socials/early_humans.htm)) a collection of resources for students from the Courtenay Middle School Library.
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